

Teaching Zen - LOL

Growing up in the northwest of Germany in the 1960s and 70s, I had the great fortune to have been raised by parents who provided a safe and secure base from which I was then able to explore the wider world, different viewpoints, new concepts, and to pursue – what I thought were – greater ideas.

I grew up within the German Catholic Church; and I am pleased to say that I experienced it as a relatively liberal, even fun-loving, place where we met other young people, made music together, sang in choirs, went camping, and to some extent – with a little help of local priests, teachers and parents – learned something about Christ and the church's moral standards. Whilst I had felt safe and secure (very fortunately, I never experienced or witnessed abusive behaviour in my family or in our local church community) I also felt restricted and confined by some of the theologies and opinions which came down from the pulpits.

Naturally, as a seventeen-year-old I began to raise questions about what really mattered in life. At the age of nineteen I left home and spent some three years in France to live alongside a monastic ecumenical Christian community with a strong devotion to peace, reconciliation and justice through contemplation, meditation and social action. In my perception at the time it was the closest thing to being radical, novel, different, poor – ideals that had become important to me in my youth and my life as a young Christian adult.

It was in that monastic community in France where I first came across a book about Zen (by Hugo Enomiya Lassalle, a Jesuit priest living in Japan who embraced Zen Buddhism in the spirit of the 2nd Vatican Council). I remember asking the senior monks about it, only to be told that prayer and meditation in their community was without method; it was to come from the heart. So I stayed clear of Zen, or any other “spiritual method” for that matter, for the time being. I continued the method of no method, trying to listen to what was arising from the heart, or – as I termed it at the time – to what I was “called to be”.

After three years in France, I decided to go back to Germany to study philosophy and theology at a Jesuit College University. I felt strongly that I was somewhat obligated to follow some “vocation” within the church, and I needed to find out for myself whether priesthood was ‘it’. I had experienced a wonderful living kind of church in the community in France and believed I could help break up those encrusted dying structures and clear the dust off old ways of Catholic living in the German church where I grew up. I believed it was possible to become a priest and a rebel – yet another ideal! It took me another 8 years of searching to figure out that that ideal was “pie in the sky”. Idealism can be a powerful driver, but without grounding it is destined to be short-lived. What helped me to ground myself was aided by my choice to let go of the ideal of priesthood or of becoming a monk and instead train as a psychotherapist and start a family.

The seminary I had lived in during my theology training was run by progressive and open-minded Jesuits, some of whom had already attended Zen retreats and were open to us students to try it out. Alongside the annual spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius I was allowed to also attend Sesshin. Soon the practice of sitting upright and counting my breath became my only way of meditation and prayer. I could no longer read prayers from books as a spiritual activity. I liked the idea(!) of simplifying everything. It was a nice fit with my desire to be radical and different.

I went on my first Sesshin in the early 90's in Germany with a Benedictine nun who had practiced Zen in Japan for some time and had been installed there as a teacher. It seemed to be a fitting link for me to have a Christian nun teach Zen. No need to become a Buddhist, I was told.

For many years after the first Sesshin I tried to continue Zazen practice on my own, and whenever possible sit with like-minded people. In the early years I read a lot of Zen books written by primarily Christian authors who appeared to somehow give me permission to do the “Zen thing” as a Christian. I actually avoided any explicit Buddhist literature at the time in case it could take ‘my precious and beloved faith’ away. It was a few years later during a Sesshin with a newly found teacher and his teacher that all those concepts about Christianity, Buddhism, Religion, God, vocations, and the rest of it, just fell away. It was not an active letting go of concepts – it was not some method of giving up or

emptying the mind – it was allowing the ideas and concepts to simply drop away. What was left? Not a thing. This is what happened (an account written down shortly afterwards):

Practicing with Mu for about 6 months, then intensive practice with Mu during Sesshin. After four days the following simply happened:

Mu is deepening with such intensity that it completely disappears in the body. Body, mind and Mu are one. Mu is no longer experienced. The 'I' vanishes completely.

No sound – no thought – no resonance – no image – no colour. Nothing. Utter emptiness. It is as if, in the immersion of Mu, all of a sudden the ground opens up, as if the floor is dragged away, and everything is becoming All, undivided – non-separate.

Mu is nothing and simultaneously all-embracing and including everything.

Indescribable vastness – no limits – no above – no below – no up – no down.

A light incomparable to any visible light – radiant, but not blinding – sheer clarity.

No ground – no fear. No time. Union – being one with all that is. At the same time it is not I who experiences this. Selflessness and wholeness. The All in Nothing, and the Nothing in All.

Tears upon tears. Different tears from the ones I have known. Tears of joy and perhaps of letting-go. Those tears are however merely an expression, a vehicle perhaps. No need to give any meaning or attention to the tears.

The only word that came to mind after this “experience” was ‘Love’ - completely given, not made by any standards, not based on worthiness – no ambition – no fear – no effort.

Not even the word ‘grace’ can capture it. Even the word ‘Love’ can only point to it. A deep sense of gratitude.

Later, a sense of being absolutely one with my wife, not in any bodily or spiritual way, simply one.

Holy scriptures come to mind and suddenly make sense: “Of course the kingdom of heaven is within us – how can it be any different?” A vastness without limits, within us!!! There is a kind of certainty that this reality is ever present, it has always been, is now, and will never cease – omnipresent, within me and within everything that is.

All sentient beings live in this reality. It must be told.

Later that day, one-to-one interview with my teacher: He had seemed preoccupied with the painful aftermaths of a fall he suffered earlier that day. Whilst he acknowledged my experience and expressed his joy, I did not get any sense that he was fully with it. He simply said that I should continue with Shikantaza now and at some point perhaps pick up some koans.

An hour later I had a one-on-one with my teacher’s teacher: As soon as I began to express what I had experienced earlier that day I felt his intense presence, completely there, all ear. After a few probing questions he termed that experience a “great opening”, exclaiming: “Now Zen truly begins for you – everything else until now was just a dry run. This will now have to take form. You will have to pass this on to others. It is not easy to teach Zen ... Begin with your wife with whom you already practice Zazen regularly”. We continued to talk about clarity, light, energy etc. We embraced each other and said our good byes.

The following morning my teacher’s teacher gave a dharma talk using a slide of an Eagle in the air with the title “Soar with Eagle’s Joy”. Afterwards I told him: “Last night I dreamed I could fly”, upon which he simply said: “You CAN fly. Very good, very good!”

This happened some twenty years after my first Sesshin.

Since then I have learned that there is not just the soaring eagle in the vast blue sky, but also the eagle that shits, and the shit on the ground that I step into and slip on. Nevertheless, learning to actually deal with that is taking its time.

For a good six years I became hooked to wanting to somehow repeat that experience of flying like an eagle. But what I kept experiencing instead was a repeated crashing into the ground. I had no idea of how to land the eagle. I did not realise at the time that I had already stopped flying the moment I had thought about it. And whenever I experienced, smelled, or even merely thought of the shitty ground, I longed to take off again.

To use another metaphor: It was like sitting in a boat from where I spotted a treasure in the depth of a lake. I marked the spot from where I saw it with a knife on the edge of the boat so that I would find the treasure again... my precious and beloved experience.

The people who guided me before, during and after that “opening” are good people with great hearts and minds. They are teachers in their own rights in a large Western Zen lineage of teachers who went through their own processes of becoming Zen teachers. For whatever reason though I did not learn how to remain grounded and to see through such experiences completely.

Subsequent koan practice was mainly done via emails and it seemingly boiled down to some insights that at some stage were okayed by the teacher when it had reached enough “depth”. I was hoping to tick off as many koans as possible. Needless to say that I barely scratched the surface – it was more like turning pages of a calendar.

Not even twelve months after that “opening”, my teacher told me he would like me to be his successor, thus “making” me a Dharma Holder. I had no idea what that actually meant and I only slowly began to understand that at that stage, and in my case, it meant that he wanted to install me as a teacher some day and “give me transmission”. I went along with it. I intensified my Zazen, attended additional retreats in Europe and the US and visited my teacher more often, assisting him during Sesshins to the best of my abilities. Three years later, in the presence of other teachers of the same lineage and other Sangha members I was installed as a “Sensei”.

In my conversations with my teachers I often touched on my anxiety that this was happening all too quickly and too soon. I also feared that this could be just another disappointment: I did not want this to be yet another kind of thing on my “vocation list”. I was reassured: “This is not the Catholic Church...”, which I took to mean that it was not to be compared to an ordination or to a binding to some external authority. My teacher said he would not want me to teach unless he was entirely confident that I am doing alright. I felt reassured and encouraged to go along with it.

With hindsight I can say that I think it was far too premature for me to be installed as a Zen teacher. It takes time to allow any opening experience to take form. It also takes good and sound guidance from experienced dharma friends to help with the all-important time of awakening in the midst of the hustle and bustle of everyday life. Allowing time and right effort to thoroughly investigate that which is right under my foot, inverting ALL experiences into the source of where it all comes from. It is my experience that genuine Zen starts where we realise the oneness of all; it is also my experience that the hard work starts there too. That’s when I could have done with some more integrative guidance.

Instead, I began to focus on ritualistic forms of Zen, the question of how to implement Zen in the “correct” etiquette. For Zen to take form does not mean to make it into some thing or a set of rules or customs that control accepted behaviour in any particular school of Zen, but to live life from the source moment by moment, allowing the emptiness to be fully expressed in THIS form here.

In the years after my installation as a Zen teacher I increasingly doubted the basis on which I was “given transmission”. Then, one day, when I was preparing a dharma talk for our sangha on “the self in Zen Buddhism”, I came across some texts and talks by Jeff Shore. Within a short while I attended my first Sesshin with Jeff. I started afresh, from the beginning. I was eager to learn again how to sit, how to breath, and how to allow the seeking mind to just stop. I found a group of people that did not cling to any rituals, robes, or ‘Zen bric-à-brac’ imported from Asia. Just getting to the pith of Zen. This to me was no ideal, no playground, no ‘pie (or eagle) in the sky’. For the first time in my life I got a sense of being on solid ground.

I began to discover Great Doubt as a vital stage on the Zen path: Allowing those questions that have been arising to grow into a doubt that eventually yearns for its resolution, yet not moving forwards nor backwards: getting stuck, in its best sense. I got a taste of a koan practice that is truly alive.

The Zen path is teaching me to get to the bottom of who I am and of what is. No need for ideals, expectations, disappointments, hopes or "callings". Once THIS is seen through, the task at hand is to live from that reality and to allow that energy to just flow freely in everyday life – no matter what framework, school, or church, I live in.

Experiences, openings, glimpses and the like continue to happen, but they are much more grounded. They are less "spectacular", and certainly nothing to hang on to. It is not so much the flying eagle (who never lands), but more of a "dragon in the withered tree", sometimes roaring, sometimes singing, sometimes sleeping ... The important thing for me to realise is that the dragon roars ONLY in the withered tree.

My zen practice has changed, and so has my relationship with the teachers who allowed me to become a teacher. I remain indebted to them for all they have given me. I am also grateful to them for allowing me to find my own ways of leading our local sangha, and above all, for not holding on to me in an attempt to shape me into a copy of some Zen ancestor. I do however want to challenge the way in which in this lineage (and perhaps other Western lineages) teachers are willing to bestow succession on someone like me who at the time was not as experienced as I believe a Zen teacher should be. I somehow wished I had taken far more time to deepen my practice before accepting to become a teacher. This is easy to say with hindsight. At the time I was on a high. I thought that the "great opening" was IT, and that this was THE prerequisite for becoming a teacher.

Yes, I can lead our little Sangha, and yes, I can give talks and offer guidance, but I am disallowing myself and others to call me "teacher". I am simply not done! I feel like spending another thirty years without any responsibilities to teach, and yet I feel compelled and committed to lead our sangha. At the moment I base my talks on the little I have lived through, I don't use my Japanese name, or wear my robe, *rakusu* or teacher's stick, and I regard our sangha as a group of Zen friends who are on the same path – not more – not less. We are trying to find ways to learn together, rather than I "teaching them". If I can guide and people want to be guided, I will offer guidance; if I find I can't guide, I will say so.

For the time being I can honestly say that to be on this path is a grace, not earned nor achieved, a wonderful opportunity to live a truth that is easily ignored by the small self that seeks to hold onto that which feels great and shiny, whether that be in the form of ideals, great experiences, ranks or titles.

If there was anything pulling me forward it would be along the lines of '*allowing Awakening to be the one and only standard in life*'. In practice this means to support each other at every opportunity to return again and again to the process of bringing everything back to its source and living from it; continuing to be taught by all and everything that arises, remaining utterly open. When no-self awakens to itself one cannot help but express it. It is then that 'teaching Zen' just happens – LOL.

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